

Maryland Campaign Staff Ride History and Recommendations

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Antietam National Battlefield
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Through a careful and objective study of the significant campaigns of the world, a professional officer acquires a knowledge of military experience which he himself could not otherwise accumulate. —Dwight D. Eisenhower



INTRODUCTION

The Maryland Campaign of 1862, which culminated in the Battle of Antietam, was a major turning point in the American Civil War and in the history of this nation. Lasting for just fifteen days, the courage, sacrifice and eventual outcome of the campaign would forever burn into the American memory names like McClellan and Lee, places like “Bloody Lane” and the “Cornfield,” and principles such as emancipation and freedom. With over 23,000 casualties, the battle of Antietam was the bloodiest one-day battle in American history. When the guns finally fell silent on the campaign and the Confederate army crossed back into Virginia, General Robert E. Lee’s first major invasion into the North was over. Although a tactical draw on the field, with Lee’s army retreating, Abraham Lincoln saw an opportunity to change the course of the war. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation had been on Lincoln’s desk since July. Now that the long hot summer of Union defeats had given way to an autumn with Union success, Lincoln signed the Proclamation just three days after Lee’s army splashed back across the Potomac River. The historic terrain provides soldiers an exceptional opportunity to study the battles on the actual ground where the critical events occurred.

EARLY CAMPAIGN STAFF RIDES

Unlike professionals in other fields, the professional soldier cannot in reality routinely practice his

craft, nor would he want to. However, the military leader must always be fully trained and tactically, operationally, and strategically sound the moment war begins. That has always been the dilemma for soldiers – how does one learn about and prepare for war without personal involvement and experience. One method is to study the great campaigns and leaders of the past. Carefully woven into training, military history can go far to provide a vicarious experience of war that is helpful in improving the professional education of soldiers. As former Army Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono described, “History sharpens the vision of the skilled commander. By taking in the events and lessons of the past, he can assess his present readiness for war and prepare himself and his subordinates for the challenges of future battles.”¹ Studying battles and leaders within the pages of books, or spread across two-dimensional maps is an excellent start. However, the best way to understand the decisions, actions, mistakes and victories of leaders past is to stand on the ground where the events took place. Only there can the true student explore and analyze significant actions within the context of the actual terrain in three dimensions. For military leaders it is not enough to just take a historical tour that relates what happened, they must dig deeper into how and why, and try to gain insights and make connections with today’s military environment. The battlefield Staff Ride is the vehicle to gain this higher understanding.

In the definitive book on the staff ride, William G. Robertson states, “Carefully designed and intelligently executed, a staff ride is one of the most powerful instruments available for the professional development of U.S. Army leaders.”² In the forward to Robertson’s book, former Chief of Staff of the Army General John Wickham, Jr., wrote that “Staff rides represent a unique and persuasive method of conveying the lesson of the past to the present-day Army leadership ... Properly conducted, these exercises bring to life, on the very terrain where historic encounters took place, examples, applicable today as in the past, of leadership tactics and strategy, communications, use of terrain, and, above all, the psychology of men in battle.”³ The military Staff Ride has long been a part of the training experience for professional soldiers. It was on the great battlefields of the American Civil War where the idea for outdoor, battlefield education began. “In the 1880s, the War Department had begun to take measures to preserve many of the greatest battlefields of the Civil War. Senior Army leaders planned from the start to use sacred grounds like Antietam not just as shrines to American valor and patriotism but also as open-air classrooms for the education of officers in the U.S. Army and National Guard.”⁴

Elihu Root, who was Secretary of War from August 1899 to January 1904, led many reforms that changed the entire fabric of the U.S. Army from a largely frontier-based, Indian-fighting force to a more modern force that would help win WWI. Secretary Root emphasized military education and was the founder of the Army War College in 1903. He reorganized the militia into the National Guard and passed General Staff Act of February 1903. The Staff Act obligated the General Staff Corps to perform duties involving “the preparation of plans and campaigns, of reports of campaigns, battles, engagements, and expeditions, and of technical histories of the military history of the United States.”⁵ The Staff Act also influenced the new War College’s use of the battlefields for Staff Rides.

Retired Brigadier General Harold Nelson, former Army Chief of History is a co-author with Dr.

Jay Luvaas of numerous War College Guides for Battlefield Staff Rides. In a recent lecture at the Military History Institute, he stated that, “Since the War College supplied the officers who were professionally credentialed to serve on the General Staff, and since the General Staff needed to be attuned to a broad range of political questions concerning the National Military Parks, it made sense to actually visit at least one of the Army’s parks.”⁶ Secretary Root’s influence was also felt at the U.S. Military Academy. The Superintendent’s report of 1902 stated:

...a notable change is one initiated by the Secretary of War, which supplements the instruction the first class receives in the operations of war by permitting it to visit one of the great battlefields of the Civil War. In April 1902, the first class, after a previous study of the Gettysburg campaign, spent two days in practical study on that battlefield, with much resulting good.... The practice of supplementing the theoretical and historical study of the art of war by a practical study of its principles on one of our famous battlefields is of such incalculable importance in the training of our young officers that I trust it is permanently incorporated in the Military Academy’s curriculum.⁷

Other early Staff Ride leaders in the American military were Colonel Arthur Wagner and Major Eben Swift. These two officers were on the staff at the Infantry and Cavalry School at Leavenworth, Kansas. They believed “that the road to an understanding of military science began with the study of military history.”⁸ Through their leadership, the Staff Ride became an integral part of the curriculum. When Major Swift was assigned to the Army War College, which was then located in Washington, D.C., he instituted the Historical Staff Ride as part of the War College training. In the beginning, students made day trips from the Capital. But starting in 1909, in the final month of the curriculum, the entire War College would travel for a month riding horseback over the

battlefields of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign and the Shenandoah Valley. Gettysburg and Antietam were added later, making the month-long trip close to 600 miles.⁹

Brigadier General William A. Stofft, Chief of Military History, said in 1986, "Around the turn of the century, the U.S. Army took the lead for the federal government in preserving and marking Civil War battlefields, primarily so that those fields could be used as outdoor classrooms for the education of officers. When the U.S. Army War College was founded about the same time, its faculty and students benefited from the results by taking extensive Staff Rides over the old battlefields."¹⁰ One early War College student, Major John A. Lejeune recalled how the battlefield lessons were "of immense value to us professionally," and Major General Hunter Liggett who was the President of the College in 1910 stated that "no officer who took these staff rides failed to appreciate their immense advantages..."¹¹

One early training method used by the War College at Antietam was to divide the class into two groups, and using generic names to focus the discussion on principles rather than specifics, they would examine the movements of the "Red" and "Blue" armies as they marched through Virginia and Maryland. Using the events of the Maryland Campaign as a guide, the instructors sometimes injected variations on the campaign to force the students to think through problems of maneuver and supply, based on terrain and their training rather than reciting historic events. Students were often asked to prepare the written orders to concentrate the scattered parts of the Red army at Sharpsburg, or move the Blue army from Washington to Frederick.

When one group in 1907 arrived at Antietam they were required to write the orders to bring each Corps of the Blue army onto the battlefield as the Army of the Potomac had done using McClellan's intent expressed in his after action report.¹² Other assignments included an examination and a simulated establishment of logistical support for the Army of the Potomac using trains, depots and roads. One class was required to determine a division level



1907 Army War College Staff Ride At Antietam
Courtesy of the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks

communications plan. However, the most important part the training involved critiquing the decisions made by Union and Confederate commanders on the field where their decisions were made, and trying to scrutinize them with the information that was available to the officer at the time.

With the onset of WWI there was a hiatus in Staff Ride training. After the "war to end all wars," the U.S. Marines starting using the Civil War battlefields for training and for publicity. Army War College graduate General John A. Lejeune, who has been called "the greatest of all Leathernecks," led them. He was the Commanding General, Marine Barracks, Quantico, Virginia, prior to his appointment as Major General, Commandant of the Marine Corps.¹³ Major General Smedley Butler, one of the few Americans who have been awarded two Congressional Medals of Honor, joined General Lejeune. Recognizing the proximity of many Civil War battle sites the Marine Corps began to use them for maneuvers and exercises using modern weapons and tactics. The public would be invited as the Marines who were stationed at Quantico Marine Base in Virginia staged battle reenactments.¹⁴ In 1921, five Regiments of Marines marched to the Wilderness Battlefield in the largest field exercise since WWI with President Warren Harding in attendance. The next year they traveled to Gettysburg and in 1923 they concentrated their efforts in the Shenandoah Valley. It was at Antietam in 1924 the Marines held their last of this series of maneuvers and reenactments. They marched from Quantico on August 24th and stopped in Frederick, Maryland for three days of

liberty. After arriving at Sharpsburg the Marines conducted training exercises that concluded with a re-enactment on September 12th before a crowd of 40,000 spectators!¹⁵

The War College also returned again to the Civil War battlefields in 1920, this time riding in motorized vehicles instead of on horseback. Funds were short so the school just visited the Virginia sites, however the 1921 tour was conducted in 28 Cadillac touring cars.¹⁶ It is not surprising that given the recent WWI experience the classes focused on the trenches and earthworks in Virginia. The practice at the War College waxed and waned during the interwar period. A Staff Ride during this era involved each student being assigned a particular phase of the campaign or battle and they would be responsible for research and preparation for a briefing to their classmates at the appropriate stop. Students would work in pairs – one taking the Union side, the other the Confederate. WWII caused another hiatus in the Staff Ride Program. In 1951 the Army War College moved to Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania, where the entire class would make an annual pilgrimage to nearby Gettysburg, a tradition that still endures.¹⁷



Military Group At The National Cemetery
N.P.S. Photo

CURRENT CAMPAIGN STAFF RIDES

In recent years numerous military schools and organizations have adopted and continued the Staff Ride tradition. Recent groups to visit Antietam Battlefield include the U.S. Naval Academy, West Point Cadets, ROTC groups, soldiers, sailors, airmen

and marines from a variety of active duty and Reserve Component units, the Secretaries of the Army and Air Force, the German Minister of Defense, Senior Service Schools and numerous foreign military groups. In addition, civilians at the Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and Department of State have toured the battlefield. For the U.S. Army it was Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono and Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh, Jr. who reestablished and emphasized the importance of the Staff Ride in the late 1980s. They saw the training as a “powerful teaching tool that can contribute to leader training at any level” that “uses military history with the actual battlefield to bring together the realities of war.”¹⁸ Obviously, the battlefield Staff Ride has a long tradition with prominent military leaders advocating its use. What are the current definitions and key elements of this unique category of training? Once again, Dr. William Robertson provides an excellent definition:

A staff ride consists of systematic preliminary study of a selected campaign, an extensive visit to the actual sites associated with that campaign and an opportunity to integrate the lessons derived from each. It envisions maximum student involvement before arrival at the site to guarantee thought, analysis, and discussion. A staff ride thus links a historical event, systematic preliminary study, and actual terrain to produce battle analysis in three dimensions. It consists of three distinct phases: preliminary study, field study, and integration.¹⁹

There are numerous topics or themes that are fundamental to a successful staff ride. The following are some primary battlefield themes in no particular order. The order and emphasis of these themes are dependent on the nature and interests of the group:

- **The gap between battle plans and execution.**

There are always opportunities on a battlefield to illustrate the fog and friction of war. Battles are dynamic, interactive tests of will that rarely go as planned. Antietam provides numerous

opportunities to illustrate this from Lee's campaign plan to the movement of the Union Second Corps.

- **Leadership.** This should be discussed at all levels at every opportunity to show how a leader's actions contribute to the outcome of battles and campaigns. The lack of leadership should also be closely examined such as Dixon Miles's decision making at Harpers Ferry. For senior leaders, looking into the mind of the army commander at the campaign level, described as generalship, can be particularly effective.

- **Initiative and courage.** This can be illustrated on the individual and unit level. Staff ride participants should examine how these factors were, or were not, central to achieving a favorable outcome.

- **The role of training and discipline.** The ability of units to withstand the challenges of combat is timeless. The artillery drill is an excellent example that can be done at many of Antietam's critical artillery locations such as Col S.D. Lee's Battalion across from the Dunker Church or Battery B, 4th U.S. Artillery's position at the Cornfield.

- **The principles of war.** For some officers the nine principles of war are just a memorized list in a book. Historic battlefields are replete with examples to validate the principles and make them real. This could, and should be the central theme of any battlefield staff ride. McClellan's inability to utilize mass in his attacks and Lee's use of maneuver and unity of command are obvious examples of training opportunities at Antietam.

- **The human dimension of war.** A soldier's physical and emotional reactions to the demands of combat are also a timeless aspect of war that all members of the military should try to understand and appreciate. Historians can find and use a wealth of primary source materials such as letters, diaries and reports.

- **Terrain.** The impact of terrain on the planning and execution of military campaigns and battles is a keystone to spending time, resources and efforts on visiting battlefields. "Stonewall" Jackson's use of the heights surrounding Harpers Ferry to effect its capture, and Lee's defensive use of Antietam Creek are just two of many examples in the Maryland Campaign.

- **Combined arms.** Historic campaigns provide an opportunity for case studies in combined arms or single arms and the relationship between weapons, tactics and doctrine. The staff ride leader must be familiar with historic weapons characteristics such as ranges, weight, accuracy, and rate of fire. Many current military specialties such as artillery, signal corps and medical aspects lend themselves to a concentration on this theme.

- **Logistics.** A comprehensive study of a commander's ability to sustain combat operations is often what separates a historical tour from a battlefield staff ride. Clearing and maintaining lines of supply had a major impact on both Lee and McClellan in the Maryland Campaign.

MARYLAND CAMPAIGN STAFF RIDE SURVEY

The Maryland Campaign and the Battle of Antietam provide exceptional opportunities for military education. As part of the research for this paper, a survey was sent to eleven professional historians who have led hundreds of staff rides on the campaign. The results of this survey provide the military professional with recommendations to improve any future battlefield staff rides of the Maryland Campaign. First, the recommended stops are:

1. South Mountain: If possible, all three gaps. However it should be noted that Fox's Gap has extremely limited parking.
2. Harpers Ferry: Bolivar Heights
3. Antietam:
 - a. Lee's Headquarters
 - b. McClellan's Headquarters at the Pry House
 - c. North Woods (park tour stop 2)
 - d. East Woods (park tour stop 3)
 - e. Cornfield (park tour stop 4)

- f. West Woods (park tour stop 5)
 - g. Bloody Lane (park tour stop 8)
 - h. Burnside Bridge (park tour stop 9)
 - i. National Cemetery (park tour stop 11)
4. Shepherdstown: Botelers Ford if time permits.

When asked at what level of war the education should be focused, the primary answer was at the operational level of war. However there are opportunities to teach strategic and tactical lessons. There were many more diverse answers to my question on what was the essence of a battlefield staff ride. General Harold Nelson, a renowned leader of battlefield staff rides stated that the essence was, “To help individuals connect with the problems faced by yesterdays leaders in complex situations, and to evaluate the solutions those leaders applied.”²⁰ Edwin Bearss, Chief Historian Emeritus of the National Park Service said, “to underscore that although there have been revolutionary advances in technology, weaponry and communication, many aspects of success in battle – small unit leadership, terrain appreciation, courage, understanding the mission, flexibility – are as vital to today’s combat arms as they were in 1861-65.”²¹ Carol Reardon, Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University, felt that it was important for soldiers to, “understand the spatial dimensions of the battlefield, the time requirements it takes to cover that space, and the complications of weather, stress, etc.” and that, “boots on the ground literally become a teaching tool.”²² Colonel Len Fullenkamp, director of the Army War College’s Staff Ride program, used the specific example of Harpers Ferry, and how standing on Bolivar Heights you can see how “difficult to defend and equally difficult to attack is readily apparent in ways that are not obvious on two-dimensional maps” and that it was important to “combine the historical with the physical – the ground speaks to those who have the ability to hear what it is telling them.”²³

There were also a variety of thoughts on the most important lessons to be learned specifically from a study of the Maryland Campaign. However, most agreed that because of the distances, it was an excellent opportunity to study an entire campaign and that Antietam in particular presented exceptional opportunities to discuss the human dimension of

war. Other specific lessons mentioned were how leadership, or the lack of it, made the difference; how military force can achieve strategic affects; opportunity to examine the interaction of military means with political ends; the importance of commander’s intent; interior lines; the contrasting use of cavalry; the role of intelligence; and of course, terrain and its impact on the battle. It is interesting to note that when asked if they used the Staff Ride training method of students role playing battlefield commanders, all eleven respondents said that they did not like this format because of the difficulties in managing the timing. In addition, many agreed that a battlefield Staff Ride is a great opportunity to build unit morale and it provides participants a chance to connect with their military, and the nation’s heritage.

CONCLUSION

From the moment Robert E. Lee’s army turned north in September of 1862 until today, members of this nation’s military have fought, died, built, preserved, researched, remembered, walked, and trained on the historic landscape of Maryland Campaign. Soldiers and veterans have been the source of inspiration and leadership that have helped create the National Military Parks. They made it possible for today’s military, and Americans of every walk of life, to learn great lessons of battle and be stirred on the very ground where men in blue and gray sacrificed so much to build a new nation.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Carl E. Vuono, “The Staff Ride: Training for Warfighting,” *The Army Historian*, PB-20-88-1 (October 1988): 1-2.

² William G. Robertson, *The Staff Ride*, Center of Military History, United States Army (Washington, D.C., 1987), Introduction.

³ Ibid., Forward.

⁴ Carol Reardon, “From Antietam to the Argonne,” *The Antietam Campaign*, ed. Gary

Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 291.

⁵ Harold Nelson, Perspectives Lecture, “Perspectives In Military History,” lecture, Carlisle Barracks, PA, U.S. Army War College, 15 May 2002. Cited with permission of General Nelson.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jay Luvaas, “The Staff Ride,” U.S. Army War College Alumni Association Newsletter (Summer 1988): 12.

⁹ Ibid. 13

¹⁰ Jay Luvass and Harold Nelson, War College Guide to the Battle of Gettysburg (University Press of Kansas, 1986), iii-iv.

¹¹ Luvass, “The Staff Ride,” 12.

¹² Reardon, 295.

¹³ Arlington National Cemetery, “John Archer Lejeune Lieutenant General, United States Marine Corps,” available from <<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.com/lejeune.htm>>; Internet; accessed 18 January 2003.

¹⁴ Capt Michael W. Stephens, “Learning From Civil War Battles.” Marine Corps Gazette Volume 72, Number 6 (June 1988): 28.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Luvass, “The Staff Ride,” 13.

¹⁷ Luvass, “The Staff Ride,” 16.

¹⁸ Vuono, 2.

¹⁹ Robertson, 5.

²⁰ Brigadier General (r) Harold Nelson, Maryland Campaign Staff Ride – Leader Questionnaire, Survey, Cited with permission of General Nelson.

²¹ Edwin Bearss, Maryland Campaign Staff Ride – Leader Questionnaire, Survey, Cited with permission of Mr. Bearss.

²² Carol Reardon, Maryland Campaign Staff Ride – Leader Questionnaire, Survey, Cited with permission of Ms. Reardon.

²³ Colonel (r) Leonard Fullenkamp, Maryland Campaign Staff Ride – Leader Questionnaire, Survey, Cited with permission of Colonel Fullenkamp.